

A Study of the Preservation of Exclusionary Disciplinary Measures: A Case Study of the United States

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Abstract

Exclusionary disciplinary measures (EDMs), specifically out-of-school suspension (OSS) and expulsion, continue to be among the most prominent tools in use in U.S. schools to manage serious student misbehavior. While critics point to their negative academic, behavioral, and psychosocial implications including contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and perpetuating racial and disability disparities, the proponents of the use of EDMs have contended that they have importance in protecting students and staff, preserving instructional time, and signaling normative limits. This research focuses on the preservation of EDMs in the United States, and the paper delves into the historical context of, the use and effects of EDMs by using a blend of policy review, empirical and documented case studies of extreme student misconduct. Findings reveal that although excessive reliance on exclusion can have a dual consequence of compounding inequities and compromising learning, judicious limitation of exclusion, within an evidence-informed framework that includes an integration of procedural safeguards, centralization of policy oversight with re-entry supports, can limit harms while preserving EDMs as a needed last resort tool. The study also puts EDMs into the context of zero tolerance policies and highlights the need to find a balance between strict enforcement and individual considerations, and alternatives, such as restorative practices and PBIS, as well as equity-focused interventions. By analyzing both the risks and strategic benefits of EDMs, this paper proposes a calibrated strategy to the discipline policy that keeps schools safe, facilitates an orderly learning environment and upholds educational equity for all students.

Keywords: exclusionary disciplinary measures, suspension, expulsion, zero-tolerance policy, school safety, United States

1. Introduction

There have been increased concerns amongst teachers and administration about student misbehavior – which has become disruptive. School administrators bear the challenging task of ensuring that school settings are safe, orderly places conducive to learning while responding to misbehavior ranging from minor classroom disruption to violence and weapons possession (Prothero, 2023). Exclusionary discipline measures - removal of students from the regular school setting via suspension or expulsion - is a deeply entrenched practice in education (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). However, research literature documents consistent associations between exclusion and worse educational and behavioral outcomes as well as mental-health outcomes, and reporting of persistent racial and disability disparities in who gets excluded. The results of these studies provide the impetus for reform, but do not necessarily mean the wholesale demise of EDMs. Instead, a calibrated policy of restricting, clarifying, and implementing exclusions humanely - with rigorous oversight - can preserve necessary safety responses while reducing collateral harm. This paper outlines such a policy framework and the empirical rationale for it. Notwithstanding the evidence and studies against the use of exclusionary disciplinary measures in schools in the United States and other parts of the world, other scholars or educator still accommodate the use of zero-tolerance policies in maintaining order within the school or learning premises (Glass, 2017), upholding the idea that expulsions are the solution for improving school climate. The aim of this study is to examine studies that propose the use of exclusionary disciplinary measures in maintaining the sanity and order of schools within the United States.

2. Disciplinary Measures in American Schools

School discipline practices in the United States take place on a structured continuum. This system balances proactive prevention with reactive intervention to maintain safe, productive learning environments. School administrators have dramatically increased their use of formal punishments like out-of-school suspensions and expulsions over the last 40 years as ways to create safe learning environments (Sorensen et al., 2021). These disciplinary measures involve a broad range of responses to student misbehavior, from informal strategies aimed at addressing the behavior verbally to the extreme form of disciplinary measures in which students are expelled from the educational environment altogether.

2.1 Types of Disciplinary Measures

The administrative team in schools tend to use multiple forms of disciplinary responses to deal with student misconduct. These measures can be broadly classified as non-exclusionary and exclusionary practices with diverse purposes under the framework of the disciplinary measures.

Non-Exclusionary Disciplinary Measures aim to achieve both objectives within a broad spectrum of behavior that requires disciplinary action: identification of the issue, investigation of its causes, correction of the situation, and student reconnection to the educational structure. These include:

- **Parental Contact:** Schools regularly contact parents or guardians to notify them of behavior concerns and enlisted their support in addressing the behavior of the student. This approach understands the important role that families play in influencing student behavior and tries to develop partnerships between home and school.
- **Structured Schoolwork Assignments:** Students may be asked to complete written assignments or reflections on their behavior, for example, Students may be asked to do written assignments or reflections on their behaviour such as writing sentences over and over again or having to write essays about their behaviour and the consequences. These assignments are designed to get the students to thinking critically about their behaviour and how it affects other **people**.
- **Counseling:** Trained professionals interact with students to get more in-depth about their behaviors/emotional concerns that could be contributing to their misbehavior. Counseling services are intended to pinpoint underlying sources of misbehavior and function as strategies to train students on better decision-making and emotional control.
- **Detention:** Students are students in school but are locked up in a particular place during lunchtime, after school or other times that are not for instruction. Detention is used as a consequence but it keeps the students in the school environment where they can still access education resources.
- **Restorative Justice Practices:** These practices focus on restoring the harm and relationships in the school community instead of employing punitive consequences (Cruz et al., 2021). Restorative justice has been described as a method of bringing a collective approach towards establishing mutual respect and guest for student participation in the evolution of a school community. Through facilitated conversations and conferences, those students who have caused harm will take responsibility for their actions and seek to repair relationships with the affected students.

Exclusionary Disciplinary Measures remove students from the regular school setting, and is the most severe consequences that can be given in schools. These include:

- **Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs):** Teachers or staff members refer students to school administrators for behavioral infractions, and the formal process for imposing discipline officially begins, with various consequences being possible.
- **In-School Suspension (ISS):** Students are removed from regular classroom instruction for a temporary period of time and are kept under direct supervision of school personnel in the school building. This way students can do their school work while being separated from their peers (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).
- **Out-of-School Suspension (OSS):** Students are temporarily removed from

school for at least 1/2 of a day but not the rest of the school year (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). During this time, students are banned from school and school-related activities, and this leads to a loss of instructional time.

- **Expulsion:** The ultimate measure of exclusion, expulsion bans a student from returning to the institution of education for the remainder of the school year or any other period (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Expulsions can be either expulsions with services, which involves providing the student with an alternative education programming, or expulsions without services, which involve no educational support for the student.
- **Law Enforcement Referrals and School-Related Arrests:** Students may be reported to law enforcement for events that occur on school grounds or at school-related events, which may involve arrests and entry into the juvenile justice system (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).
- **Other Restrictive Practices:** Some schools use other forms of restrictive practices such as seclusion (where students are isolated in designated spaces) or physical restraint but these measures have become subject to greater controversy and are regulated or prohibited in many jurisdictions.

2.2 The Shift Towards Alternative Approaches

The implementation of various disciplinary approaches is a reflection of a philosophical shift in the response of schools to student misbehaviour. In response to mounting evidence both of the ineffectiveness and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline, in recent years many schools have begun using alternative approaches to deal with the underlying causes of mis-behavior addressed rather than simply punishing it. These systemic reforms are an important move toward keeping students in schools and working toward elimination of the persistent disparities we've been seeing in American school discipline for decades.

School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS): aims to enhance discipline practices using universal screening, a series of interventions and supports, and data-based progress monitoring (Cruz et al., 2021). Most states are now providing guidance to districts on implementation of multitiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), restorative practices, progressive discipline, and classroom-based interventions (Camacho et al., 2024). Progressive discipline approaches ensure that less restrictive interventions are used in the early stages, before more restrictive consequences can be applied, while classroom-based interventions involve teacher-implemented strategies to control behavioral problems from the onset. Progressive discipline approaches make sure that less restrictive interventions are applied in the first stages before more restrictive consequences are applied, while classroom-based interventions entail teacher-implemented strategies for controlling behavioral problems at the onset, to avoid it entirely.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): programs and multi-tiered systems of support to foster a better climate in schools and to prevent student behavioral challenges before they escalate

These approaches have been a conceptual shift away from only focusing on student behavior to addressing relationships within the school and community, recognizing the importance of addressing relationships within the school and community to bring about sustainable change in discipline reform efforts, rather than caving in to punitive responses only (Cruz et al., 2021).

2.3 The Role of Principal Discretion in Disciplinary Decisions

Research has shown that the principal and individuals on their leadership team are mostly responsible for the disciplinary decisions in the school (Sorensen et al., 2021). Within the law, principals frequently exercise broad discretion over suspension decisions, especially for minor incidents reported to them for which the decision to suspend a student rest entirely with school leadership alone, which determines whether to suspend a student, whether the suspension proceeds in or out of school and for how long the suspension should last (Sorensen et al., 2021). This discretionary power means that the individual philosophy and biases of principals have important influence on the disciplinary environment in their schools.

The administrative team usually has a wide range of choices when it comes to responding to the violations, such as speaking to the student and parents, suspending students from the classroom, in-school suspension, or expelling students from school (Sorensen et al., 2021). Despite this string of options, there has been varying attitudes from principals to their responsibility, which usually symbolizes their individual wishes, whether to use exclusion as opposed to prevention (Sorensen et al., 2021). Schools led by principals who favor exclusion and not prevention are more likely to have more suspension and expulsion (Sorensen et al., 2021). Even when states or districts enact policies to limit the use of suspensions, there are evidence that principals are able to ignore these policies, providing support as evidence that "the principal is the policy" (Sorensen et al., 2021).

The consequences of this discriminatory power are huge and far-reaching. Using linked disciplinary, education and criminal justice records, research found that students in schools with more harsh principals were more likely to have a juvenile justice complaint and less likely to graduate from high school (Sorensen et al., 2021). In addition, the decrease in attendance and test scores among students with minor disciplinary infractions in schools with tough principals was even greater than among similar students in schools with less harsh principals (Sorensen et al., 2021). Such findings imply that schools need alternative tactics to deal with minor offenses, and policymakers should find a way to ensure that the immense power that principal have to remove students is put to use in a fair and evidence-based manner (Sorensen et al., 2021).

2.4 Documented Harms of Exclusionary Discipline

The research evidence has shown such serious negative consequences that are linked with exclusionary discipline practices. Inclusive discipline studies have shown that exclusionary forms of discipline are linked to lost instruction time, reduced academic outcomes and an increased likelihood of truancy and dropout (Cruz et al., 2021). Students who are arrested out of school have poor long-term life outcomes, compared with students who were not

suspended, including risk of having an arrest record or being on probation as adults, and lower risk of earning a high school diploma or college degree (Camacho et al., 2024). Furthermore, a single suspension in ninth grade predicts school dropout and research shows that harsher exclusionary discipline does not lead to a decrease in future behavioral concerns either for the students or their peers (Camacho et al., 2024).

As their reliance on exclusionary practices is at the root of poor educational outcomes, it is important to note that the premium use of exclusionary practices has led to missed educational opportunities, classroom time (Ksinan et al., 2021). Higher rates of suspension and expulsion are associated with lower levels of schoolwide academic achievement as well as negative perception of school climate (Cruz et al., 2021). These findings call into question the assumption that removing disruptive students helps improve learning conditions for those who do not get expelled as instead it may be that high rates of exclusionary discipline hurt these entire school communities.

2.5 Persistent Disparities in Disciplinary Outcomes

One of the most troubling consequences of exclusionary discipline is the fact that it is not applied equitably towards students who are from different racial, ethnic and demographic groups. Despite the fact that schools have come to adopt these exclusionary practices in an attempt to maintain safe and undisturbed learning environments, there still exist large disparities in the manner that disciplinary measures are applied to student populations (Camacho et al., 2024).

Racial Disparities: The evidence is consistent that exclusionary practices seem to be more rooted in African American students, which might affect the educational promise of minority students and during adolescence, they might end up without prospects of completing secondary education as they lack the opportunity (Ksinan et al., 2021). Research based on federal data for more than 32 million students in almost 96,000 schools shows wide disparities in the rates at which Black and White students are disciplined (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Black students are much more likely to be issued in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, school-related arrests, and expulsions than their White peers (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

African American students were found to face significantly higher rates of disciplinary measures in both the middle and high school eras, with the ethnic/racial discrepancy increasing with the severity of punishment (Ksinan et al., 2021). Black students are over-represented in the harmful exclusionary practice of suspension at 4:1 or more ratio than White peers for often subjective offenses prone to implicit bias (Camacho et al., 2024). Research based on administrative datasets and longitudinal samples has consistently found that Black American students are much more likely to be suspended or expelled and, when they receive office referrals, are much more likely to receive harsher punishments (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Black students' behaviors are both perceived to be as problematic and punished more harshly compared with White students for the same offense (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). A controlled

experiment involving hypothetical vignettes have found that compared with White students: Teachers were more likely to view the same behavior from Black students having been indicative of a long-term problem and deserving of suspension (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Additionally, discipline data from an urban high school revealed that black students were significantly more likely to be referred to the office for discipline on the basis of defiant behavior (a relatively subjective category of misbehavior) than for hard-to-measure infractions such as truancy or fighting (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Students self-identifying as belonging to two or more races were also more likely to be punished than White students for all types of school discipline in both middle and high schools (Ksinan et al., 2021). Of particular concern is evidence that principals who display racial bias in their decisions about disciplining students widen the educational gap between White and Black students (Sorensen et al., 2021). County level estimates of racial bias, measured using data from about 1.6 million people taking the Project Implicit website, are related to racial disciplinary disparities across schools in the United States (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Specifically, counties in which rates of explicit biases favoring Whites were higher had higher Black-White disciplinary disparities in all five disciplinary outcomes considered (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Disability-Related Disparities: The use of suspensions on students with disabilities is disproportionately represented and typically at a rate double that of their nondisabled peers, especially for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Camacho et al., 2024). These disparities are further compounded for students with intersecting identities; for example, Black students with disabilities bear even greater risk of inequitable suspension and expulsion policies (Camacho et al., 2024).

Socioeconomic and Geographic Factors: Whether or not a student receives disciplinary actions is predicted not only by individual characteristics such as being a member of an ethnic minority, but also by more distal contextual factors, including school characteristics and geographic region (Ksinan et al., 2021). School level variables have important impacts on school discipline, which is influenced by whether a student is from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) school and their regional context, students who come from lower SES schools and certain regions are at a bigger risk of receiving different discipline measures (Ksinan et al., 2021). The proportion of students receiving free or reduced lunch at a school was positively linked to higher rates of school discipline for all disciplinary measures (Ksinan et al., 2021). Additionally, students from smaller middle schools were more at risk for some disciplinary measures, whereas larger schools had higher rates of in-school suspensions (Ksinan et al., 2021).

These findings highlight the importance of policy targeting racial disparities in education and psychological bias because the mechanisms that cause these disparities likely exist in part within the broader community (Riddle & Sinclair 2019). School discipline is ultimately administered at the local level where administrative beliefs, teacher classroom management practices and school culture are especially influential in determining both the use of exclusionary discipline and the size of racial/ethnic disparities in disciplinary outcomes

(Ksinan et al., 2021). These disciplinary disparities, in particular, are of concern because they increase students at risk for poor life outcomes such as involvement in the criminal justice system and academic failure (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

3. The Zero-Tolerance Policy

Zero-tolerance policies refer to a category of punitive measures in schools for which predetermined consequences must be applied for certain behaviours, irrespective of context and mitigating circumstances (APA, 2008; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). These policies came forth from the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994, which was primarily aimed at addressing growing concerns of violence and the use of drugs and disorder in school settings. In practice, zero-tolerance is defined as the application of pre-determined disciplinary measures to a behavioural incidence regardless of the individual circumstances surrounding it (Findlay, 2008).

Zero tolerance proponents maintain that these policies have several benefits. They claim that mandatory sanctions increase consistency of school discipline, create a safer and more ordered school climate by eliminating disruptive students and serve as a deterrent to others participating in similar behaviours. In addition, these policies have been reported to have strong parental support (Curran, 2016). The logic is that having clearly defined rules with fixed consequences provides transparency and predictability that in turn reinforces the authority of the school administration and allows a most conducive environment to the process of learning to take place.

However, empirical evidence to support these claims is very limited. Studies indicate that zero tolerance policies can have very negative consequences, especially if they are implemented without flexibility or consideration of individual circumstances (Avery-Overduin & Poed, 2023; Curran, 2016; Kittelman, McIntosh, & Hoselton, 2019; Nasir et al., 2013; Skiba, 2008). Critics contend that such policies are untrue of the unique needs of students who face challenges such as disabilities, trauma or sexual emotional difficulty thereby violating the principles of reasonable accommodations and equitable treatment incorporated in educational legislations (Evans & Lester, 2012).

A further concern is the link between exclusionary discipline measure such as suspension and expulsion and subsequent engagement of students with the criminal justice system - a phenomenon that is often said to be the school-to-prison pipeline (Monohan et al., 2014). This relationship establishes the importance of finding evidence-based alternatives to zero tolerance approaches making use of strict exclusionary measures (Avery-Overduin & Poed, 2023).

In summary, while zero tolerance policies have been set up with the intention to promote safety, consistency and order in schools, the implementation of such policies has revealed more than one challenge. The failure to take into account contextual factors and individual circumstances can have unintended negative consequences, highlighting the need for balanced and careful approaches that maintain discipline while safeguarding the rights and educational opportunities of students.

3.1 Importance of Zero-Tolerance Policies in Maintaining Law and Order in Schools

Zero tolerance policies are important in promoting safety, discipline and order in schools. These policies require predetermined consequence for particular behaviours irrespective of mitigating circumstances, and introduced to ensure strict adherence to school rules as well as the growing concern about violence, drugs, and disorder in schools (Chittom & Walter, 2024). Their value is above all in the clarity and predictability they give, for example by setting rules, being explicit and having fixed consequences which schools give pupils an environment in which behavioural expectations are unambiguous, and boundaries are clearly defined. This consistency is the foundation for law and order and aiding in providing the stable, secure, learning atmosphere to all students.

A key importance of zero tolerance policies include their deterrence effect in dangerous and disruptive behaviours. Because these policies are automatic with consequences, for example, being suspended or expelled, students are made aware of the seriousness of infractions, including those involving weapons possession, drug use, and violent conduct (Chittom & Walter, 2024). Clear communication of expectations and penalties minimize the chance of misconduct and assist in a safe, orderly environment in which teaching and learning can take place without frequent disruptions. Will The preventative role of zero tolerance policies has ensured that students know the consequences of stepping outside pre-determined behavioural limits and reinforces discipline throughout the school community.

Furthermore, fixed and consistent consequences give schools an opportunity to act decisively in situations when rules are violated. Immediate disciplinary action helps in discouraging the escalation of the conflicts, prevents the recurrence of the bad behaviours and reinforces the message that the academic institution operates with standards, and the standards are enforced in classrooms, schools, colleges and universities in Creek. Evidence from some school districts shows the implementation of zero tolerance policies has contributed to measurable decreases in the number of violent incidents and drug offences thus proving that the stringent enforcement of a policy certainly can have a positive impact on the safety over all schools. A safer environment in turn supports the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students which allows them to better focus on their academic tasks.

Zero-tolerance policies also ensure the learning rights of students who follow school rules. By taking persistently disruptive or dangerous individuals out of the classrooms, administrators help to make sure that teaching and learning occur in a safe and conducive environment (Chittom & Walter, 2024). This makes a contribution to equitable access to education especially for those students for whom school is a structured and secure place. Moreover, the use of predetermined consequences creates fairness within the disciplinary procedure as the room for bias or inconsistent judgment is drastically reduced. Uniform enforcement is used to ensure that all students are being held to the same standard which reinforces transparency and trust in school leadership.

While there are critics of the policies who claim that there are challenges and that if a child gets caught in something (usually a minor thing) they can't get saved and will get punished, the main purpose of zero tolerance policies is vital: to keep the school quiet to maintain law,

order and security (Bilello & Soowal PLLC, 2024). Responsible use - If these policies are implemented in ways that are responsible and balanced between keeping the strict enforcement atmosphere and making contextual judgment and informed decisions students benefit from an organised and respectful learning environment. By identifying and clearly articulating what behaviours are unacceptable, deterring misconduct and supporting a stable school climate - zero-tolerance policies are contributions to academic success and emotional wellbeing, some of which are the ultimate factor in ensuring that schools continue to be safe and conducive places for the majority of students.

4. Some Case Studies of Misconducts that Warrant Harsh Disciplinary Measures

Student misconduct in US schools has been a rising issue of concern, especially after the pandemic of Covid-19. Research suggests that violent outbursts and serious behavioral infractions performed by students have been on the rise in recent years, with one out of three teachers reporting being threatened by students and 14% reporting physical violence from students (Alvarez, 2023). This section provides a documentation of some real incidents of serious student misconduct across various states in the USA that do warrant a significant disciplinary intervention.

4.1 Documented Cases of Serious Misconduct

The following table summarizes recorded incidents of student misconduct that have been reported in the literature of publications and research in education. Due to federal student privacy laws (FERPA), individual student identities and specific demographic details are protected in published reports.

Table 1. Documented student misconduct incidents in U.S. schools

State/Location	Date/School	Type of Misconduct	Student Level	Outcome / Response
Kent, Washington	—	Physical assault on multiple adults (hitting, scratching, spitting, kicking)	Elementary (5-year-old)	Limited interventions available; at least six adults assaulted (Álvarez, 2023)
Texas	—	Physical assault on teacher (punching)	Middle school	Student arrested; administrators initially discouraged police involvement (Álvarez, 2023)
Texas	—	Verbal death	Middle	Minimal

		threats against school teacher		administrative action; teacher feared reporting to work (Álvarez, 2023)
Kent, Washington	—	Threatening gesture with simulated weapon	Middle school	Incident downplayed by administrators (Álvarez, 2023)
Rochester, New York	—	Sexual assault on teacher during fight intervention	High school	Conflict linked to neighborhood disputes spilling into school (Sawchuk, 2021)
Annapolis, Maryland	—	Brawl and stabbing incident	High school	Seven juvenile arrests (Sawchuk, 2021)
Shreveport, Louisiana	—	Multiple violent incidents	High school	Twenty-three student arrests in one week (Sawchuk, 2021)
Memphis, Tennessee	—	School shooting	K–8 school	One student critically injured; incident linked to bullying (Sawchuk, 2021)
Vermont	—	Property destruction (overturning furniture, damaging classrooms)	Elementary school	Suspensions issued (Sawchuk, 2021)
Alexandria, Virginia	—	Multiple violent incidents and credible threats	High school	District temporarily reinstated school police officers (Sawchuk, 2021)
California (Oakland)	2022-09-28, King Estates School Complex	School shooting / gun violence	—	One person killed, five wounded; campus lockdown; no suspects arrested (Wikipedia,

2023)				
California (Olivehurst)	1992-05-01, Lindhurst High School	School shooting — / mass shooting		Four killed (three students and one teacher), ten injured; perpetrator captured and sentenced to death (Wikipedia, 2023)
New Jersey	2022–23 school year (statewide)	Weapons — offences / school violence		942 weapons-related incidents referred to police (NJ Spotlight News, 2024)
Alaska (Anchorage)	2021	Fights and — assaults among students		Increase in suspensions; rise in physical aggression (Sawchuk, 2021)
Colorado (Littleton)	1999-04-20, Columbine High School	School shooting — / mass shooting		16 dead, 23 wounded; multiple weapons used; national lockdown response (Wikipedia, 2023)
Michigan (statewide)	2023–24 school year	Violent crime — (assaults, school-based violence)		770 victims recorded in 2023–24; 893 in 2024–25 (Drew & Clarke, 2025)
Michigan (Detroit Public Schools)	2024–25 school year	Violent crime — within district		408 victims documented in 2024–25 (Drew & Clarke, 2025)
Florida (statewide)	2013–2023 decade	Gun-related — school incidents (discharges, brandishing, bullets on property)		71 firearm-related incidents; rate tripled from previous decade; state ranked 3rd nationally (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024)

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4.2 Analysis of Misconduct Patterns

The expanded data set shows growing patterns of serious student misconduct in several states, making it an even greater imperative that schools in the United States maintain families' disciplinary systems. The cases include broad categories of concern: (1) physical attack against the teachers and staff, (2) threats and weapon related behaviors, and (3) large-scale or high-impact school violence.

Political attacks on educators and others are age-old and growing. As counted by Alvarez (2023), teachers have been hit, kicked, punched, scratched and even sexually assaulted by students. The case of a 5-year-old in Kent, Washington that was attacking at least six adults illustrates how even the early-grade learners can display highly dangerous behavior if the appropriate support systems are not available (Alvarez, 2023). Additional instances from Anchorage, Alaska indicate an uptick in student-on-student fights and violent outbursts that led to more suspension and schoolwide safety concerns (Sawchuk, 2021).

A second significant trend is the threats of violence and weapons-related misconduct, which have gotten both more and worse. Threats like death threats, intimidation, cyber-harassment and simulating weapon gestures have been reported in several states (Alvarez, 2023). New Jersey's statewide data reports an additional 942 weapons related incidents reported to the police in one school year (NJ Spotlight News, 2024), so we see weapons possession in schools is not insular to a certain few districts, but rather a larger national issue. Florida's ten-year record of 71 firearm-related incidents, such as discharges, brandishing, and finding of bullets in school property, indicates that the rate of infiltration of weapons on campuses has surged dramatically, tripling from the previous decade (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024).

The most severe and alarming pattern is on school shootings and events of mass violence which represent the highest-risk category of student misconduct. Historical tragedies like the one at the Columbine High School, a massacre that left 16 people dead and 23 injured (Wikipedia, 2023), still affect school safety protocols all over the country. More recent incidents, like one at the King Estates School Complex in Oakland, California that killed one and injured five, show that gun-related school violence is warranted and an ongoing threat (Wikipedia, 2023).

The Michigan statewide data are also a troubling escalation of school-based violent crime in general, as students in 2023-24 experienced 770 victims and the year after that, 893 (Drew & Clarke, 2025). Detroit Public Schools alone recorded 408 victims of violent crime in 2024-25 and that shows how concentrated and chronic violence may become in urban school districts (Drew & Clarke, 2025).

Overall, the patterns etched in the reports helps paint a picture of a national landscape where violence, threats and weapons related offences are on the rise in the K-12 environment. These incidents--ranging from daily physical assaults to large-scale school shootings-- illustrate the rising levels of complexity involved in student misconduct and lend support for the need for

sound discipline systems that have the capacity to ensure school safety, staff and student safety, and response to risky student behavior.

4.3 Demographic Patterns in School Discipline

While individual case demographics are protected, when extensive research is conducted, large-scale research shows that there are substantial disparities in the application of discipline across demographic groups. Black students are three times as likely to be out of school suspension as White students when we control for behavior, socioeconomic status, and academic performance (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024).

Research on student perceptions of unfair discipline shows that overall, 19.3% of students reported being unfairly disciplined at school and prevalence of unfair discipline was much higher for Black (23.1%) than Hispanic (18.4%) or White (18.1%) students (Krause et al., 2024). Male students always had a higher prevalence of reported unfair discipline than female students, irrespective of racial group (Krause et al., 2024). It is also important to note that among the portion of students who identify their sexual identity in some other way, 81.7% of American Indian or Alaska Native students and 57.1% of multiracial students had experienced unfair discipline (Krause et al., 2024).

These disparities cannot be attributed to behavior differences. Research consistently demonstrates that Black students are punished more harshly for more subjective indiscretions like "disorderly conduct" or "attitude" and White students engaging in similar behaviors receive lesser consequences (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024). These racial disparities are due to racially discriminatory policies and practices and cannot be explained by variation in socioeconomic status or variations in behavior and academic performance (Krause et al., 2024). This pattern gives cause for serious concern regarding equity in the practice of discipline in U.S. schools.

4.4 Challenges in Addressing Student Misconduct

Educators and administrators are faced with serious challenges when addressing serious student misconduct issues. Parsons, a fourth-grade teacher based in Kent, Washington, said "some of our students are angry and confused." They are demanding more than what they're getting and we just can't do it with the amount of feet that we've got on the ground" (Alvarez, 2023). Schools report on the insufficient ratios of counselors to their students, with some schools have as low as three social workers for 952 students (Sawchuk, 2021).

Administrative inconsistency is also a problem. De La Rosa, president for the El Paso Teachers Association, said the students who bring weapons to school are frequently back in class the following day despite being reported (Alvarez, 2023). Martin, president of the Kent Education Association, reasoned the reasons for why administrators tend to downplay incidents can be because they don't want consequences, so they change the verbiage of reports so that threats don't need to be rated as seriously (Alvarez, 2023).

Research about unfair discipline shows robust links to a number of negative health outcomes. Students who did not report fair discipline were found to be significantly more likely to

report being bullied at school or electronically, skipping school because they did not feel safe, carrying a weapon at school, abusing prescription opioids, having poor mental health, having sustained feelings of sadness or hopelessness, seriously considering attempting suicide, and attempting suicide (Krause et al., 2024). Among the students who said they were subjected to unfair discipline, more than 50 percent said they had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, about one-fourth to one-third said they seriously considered attempting suicide, with more than 1 in 10 students attempting suicide (Krause et al., 2024). These findings underscore that school discipline is an important public health issue in addition to being an education policy issue.

5. The Essence of the Preservation of the Exclusionary Disciplinary Measure

5.1 Scope and Rationale for Exclusionary Discipline

Nationwide data show millions of students have been suspended each year, and large racial and disability disparities exist: students of color, and especially black students, as well as students with disabilities, are suspended and expelled at much higher rates than their peers. Several federal reports and civil rights investigations have documented these disparities and raised concerns about the contribution of exclusionary practices to the school-to-prison pipeline.

A significant and empirical literature has identified suspension as being associated with negative academic outcomes such as decreased test performance, an increased likelihood of dropping out, behaviour escalation, and poorer mental and subsequent behavioural health trajectories. Meta-analytic work and systematic reviews repeatedly find that suspension is associated with academic achievement (inversely) and dropout and other adverse outcomes (positively). At the same time, it is difficult to make such causal inference because students who are suspended often are different from other students in many ways. However, careful studies done, methodologically, are finding damaging causal effects especially for out-of-school suspensions (OSS).

Calls for the elimination of exclusionary disciplinary measures (EDMs) are a response to these obvious harms; however, there are practical reasons why it is important to maintain a last resort measure which is an exclusion. Immediate safety threats, such as weapons, physical assaults or credible threats to the safety of other students and staff, may call for the rapid removal to restore order. Deterrence and norm signaling are other considerations: the possibility of severe sanctions can deter extreme behaviours and reinforce community norms when other interventions are unsuccessful. Temporary exclusion also gives time in which due process can be given during investigations and for schools to take action to implement the legal measures or safety measures without disruption. Finally, alternatives to exclusion, such as restorative practices or PBIS are preventive and rehabilitative, but may not be feasible in the case of acute, violent incidents. These rationales make sense for continuing EDMs, but only within a tightly constrained, rights-protective policy framework that is based on evidence and informed by civil rights guidance.

5.2 Intended Purpose and Evidence of Effectiveness

The intended purpose of exclusionary discipline is to improve the learning environment by removing disruptive students, but new evidence is emerging to demonstrate that the opposite may occur (Wang et al., 2023). While schools strive to protect classrooms and maintain instructional time, the removal of students often disrupts learning for all students (both for students who have been suspended and students for whom they are interacting), have unintended academic and social consequences.

Research has shown that the most frequent exclusion actually can worsen behavioral problems-because it is not consistent-it can make the situation worse, rather than better. Students who may be repeatedly suspended or expelled may face particularly high levels of disengagement, resentment and alienation from their school community and therefore be even more likely to commit future misconduct. Additionally, exclusionary practices do not usually address underlying causes of misbehaviour, such as trauma, learning difficulties, or external stressors.

Despite all these challenges, EDMs can be a necessary measure to take in some extreme cases. They form a structured and formal way of dealing with serious misconduct in a manner that protects the wider school community. When used judiciously and coupled with some support services, exclusion can be a piece in the puzzle of keeping students safe and preventing disorder but should never be substituted with proactive interventions that help to prevent behavior issues in the first place.

5.3 Exclusionary Discipline as a Rationalized Myth

Exclusionary discipline is also a rationalized myth in the institutions of education. Rationalized myths are defined by the character of setting social exercises as technical targets and drawing legitimacy irrespective of gathered empirical assessment. In schools, these myths are reflected in the organization behaviors and beliefs regarding zero tolerance policies that originated in the mid-1990s. Zero-tolerance imposes mandatory exclusionary sanctions for a fixed number of offences and is being used by schools to quickly punish students for major and minor offences, becoming institutionalised as the norm in numerous states and districts (Cohen, 2013).

However, as with rationalized myths, the supposed blessings of zero-tolerance policies are relatively undocumented. Studies consistently show little in the way of school safety or student outcome improvements related to these rigorous disciplinary frameworks. The persistence of these practices is a reflection of organizational norms and historical precedent, rather than demonstrable effectiveness, pointing to the need for policies based on research and equitable application.

5.4 Benefit of a Centralized, Evidence-Informed Policy

Despite the hazards of EDMs, a centralized and evidence-based policy is an asset to the students in a number of ways (Valant, 2018). First, it can act to limit disparities in the application of discipline and limit opportunities for discriminatory punishment. Data from the

Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) indicates wide disparities in the rate of suspensions and expulsions by race and ethnicity, which is consistent with trends at the national level (District of Columbia Office of State Superintendent, 2017). A clear and centralized structure that assures all students are treated equitably and that decisions are made according to clear standards.

Second, a standardized policy will prevent schools from using suspension or expulsion as a mechanism to "push out" certain students. In urban environments where there is high school choice like in D.C., accountability systems can perversely encourage schools to force students out to generate better performance measures (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). Centralized policies can help protect against these practices so that disciplinary decisions are not made for administrative convenience or performance results but for safety and learning.

Third, centralized policies push schools to deal with the symptoms of misbehavior instead of merely refraining from engaging in school exclusion. OSSE data reveal that 38% of suspended students were suspended more than once that same year, and implication is that punitive measures are not enough to prevent recurrent misbehavior (District of Columbia Office of State Superintendent, 2017). Promoting supportive interventions, mental health services, and behavioral strategies, a centralized framework promotes a proactive approach to discipline by addressing the root causes of misconduct.

5.5 Policy and Historical Context

Racial disparities in discipline have increased over the last three decades, meaning that Black students are taken out of school at a consistently higher rate than their peers, even after controlling for behavior and socioeconomic factors. These inequities are the long-term effect of exclusionary practices, particularly vulnerability to the school-to-prison pipeline, for marginalized students.

Policies such as zero tolerance rules and the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 were put into place as a response to the spiking levels of school violence during the mid-1990s and were implemented in an attempt to restore order and enable safety. While well-intentioned, these efforts often shored up disparities and didn't always better outcomes for students or schools. Those types of punitive reactions get institutionalized over time, and it helped in fashioning the responses in administration and organizational norms.

And federal, state and district efforts in recent years have been focused on alternatives to strict exclusion such as restorative practices, multi-tiered systems of behavioral interventions, and staff development in areas such as equity and bias in discipline. Preserving EDMs in this modern context mean that schools will have a last resort option in their tool kit for dealing with extreme situations, but only when", they write, "they are equitably applied, consistently used, and used in conjunction with proactive supports that target the root causes of misbehavior. Such an approach strikes a balance of safety, fairness and educational opportunity to ensure that exclusionary discipline is used as a measure as opposed to a default solution.

6. Conclusion

The maintenance of exclusionary disciplinary measures (EDMs) in US schools is a complex balancing act between the need for safe and orderly learning environments, and the reduction of the well-documented harms that are associated with suspension and expulsion. This study raises awareness that although EDMs are linked to negative academic, behavioral and psychosocial effects such as increased risks for dropping out of school, reduced academic achievement and increased involvement with the juvenile justice system, it is nonetheless an important tool in responding to severe or violent student misconduct that threaten the safety of the student and staff. Evidence from case studies documents that extreme incidences that involve physical assaults, weapon possession and credible threats, often require immediate and definitive action that is not as well-positioned by alternatives such as restorative practices or PBIS to deal with in the moment.

Moreover, the research underscores the ongoing disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline with black students, students with disabilities and other marginalized groups being disproportionately affected. These inequities highlight the importance of ensuring that centralized and evidence-informed policies that consider not only how to limit the use of exclusionary measures, but to actually build-in mechanisms of accountability, procedural safeguards, and support, to help avoid discriminatory outcomes. And, properly contextualized in a rights-protective, supportive policy framework, EDMs could help as a last resort tool that is able to ensure school safety without compromising educational equity.

The study goes on to show how zero tolerance policies, while an attempt to bring clarity, consistency and deterrence to the school system, must be implemented carefully to prevent foreseeable consequences such as rigid punishment for minor infractions, perpetuation of systemic disparities. Future policy efforts should include integration of EDMs with some preventive and rehabilitative strategies like restorative practices, multi-tiered behavioral supports, and social emotional learning efforts. Ultimately, the cautious and well-used maintenance of exclusionary discipline - in connection with supportive interventions - can be a part of safe, conducive and even sufficiently equitable learning environments to ensure schools are effectively addressing extreme, dangerous behavioral risks with an appropriate balance against school education and developmental rights for all students.

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